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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0741
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1575

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 001220

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STATE FOR NEA/FO (GRAY), NEA/MAG (GERMAINE, LAWRENCE),
NEA/PPD (FERNANDEZ, SMITH, AGNEW), NEA/PI (MULENEX, KIRBY),
NEA/PA, NEA/IPA, I/GNA, DRL, CWG-PD
PARIS FOR ZEYA

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAQ](#) [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [KMPI](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: TUNISIA OBSERVES WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY

REF: A. 05 TUNIS 977

[1B.](#) 05 TUNIS 1085

[1C.](#) TUNIS 387

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson; reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

1.(C) Summary: World Press Freedom Day (May 3) 2006 was observed in Tunisia with the usual repeat of GOT pronouncements in support of a free press, unaccompanied by any new initiative to make reality match the rhetoric. Both the Tunisian Journalists Association and the unrecognized Tunisian Journalists Union published critical reports on the situation of the media, with the former focusing on the myriad financial and administrative issues that affect Tunisian journalists and the latter taking more pointed aim at the government control over the media. All of the Tunisian newspapers highlighted President Ben Ali's May 3 message to Tunisian journalists in which he endorsed the "fundamental rights" of freedom of the press and expression. Ironically, however, only one (opposition) newspaper covered a protest on the lack of press freedom that was blocked by police. End Summary.

Usual Rhetoric

2.(U) In a May 3, 2006 message to Tunisian journalists and communicators, President Ben Ali stated that "freedom of expression and that of the press are fundamental rights of the individual." He went on to reaffirm his support of the Tunisian media with "a view to make it better equipped to reflect the deep changes our society is undergoing in its march towards democracy and modernity" and to promise that "we will strive to further strengthen freedom of the press." The President expressed his support for a "free, democratic, and objective press" and previewed a further opening of the national media to the private sector. This was the same message that he passed to journalists on World Press Freedom Day in 2005. (Ref A) Several journalists expressed their disappointment that the President did not use the opportunity to announce any new press initiatives; many were hoping that he would announce the licensing of new private media, an initiative which was rumored to be in the works as of November 7, 2005.

Tunisian Journalists Association (AJT) Report

3.(C) On May 3, the Tunisian Journalists Association (AJT) released its annual report on the situation of the press in Tunisia. As opposed to last year, when two reports were simultaneously published by two different factions of the AJT (resulting in police interrogations and public

recriminations) (Ref B), the Association's board released a unified report that repeated the usual criticisms of the financial and administrative situation of Tunisian journalists. As in past years, the AJT report detailed many of the challenges facing Tunisian journalists, including the fact that no new newspapers were licensed and noting the near absence of investigative reporting or editorial comment on local issues. While the AJT report criticized the government owned-television's programming and also mentioned "censorship, abusive licensing practices, and refusal of coverage of some events," the authors studiously avoided any direct criticism of the GOT. In a subsequent AJT communique published on May 20, the AJT praised President Ben Ali for his support for journalists in Tunisia.

Tunisian Journalists Union (SJT) Report

4.(C) Lotfi Hajji, the President of the unrecognized Tunisian Journalists Union, also released a report on the situation of the press in Tunisia. Given the illegal status of his organization, the SJT report was distributed informally to Tunisian journalists, civil society organizations, and embassies. This year's report is more straightforward than last year's SJT report (Ref B) in its direct accusation of GOT harassment of journalists and control over media outlets such as nominally private "Ash Shourouq" (the most widely read newspaper in Tunisia). The report provides a level of detail not previously seen as it mentions specific cases of journalists who face financial hardships, editorial abuses, and unfair treatment. On May 12, Hajji was convoked to police headquarters and interrogated for four hours about an "illegal" meeting of "civil society representatives" at his home in Bizerte. The list of representatives presented to him by the police included the names of his wife and brother.

Hajji confided to Embassy personnel his belief that this interrogation was a further attempt to intimidate him given his public criticism of the GOT.

GOT Blocks Demonstration for Greater Freedom of Expression

5.(C) On May 3, the members of the Movement of October 18 (Ref C) called for a demonstration in support of greater freedom of the press and expression in front of the headquarters of the government-owned Tunisian radio and television. Security forces blocked the would-be protesters from reaching the planned site. An October 18 communique stated "Security forces in large numbers closed the entries leading to the assembly place and violently attacked several of the participants ... and arrested a number of young men who were released later." One Tunisian newspaper, opposition paper "Al Mawqif" reported on this event.

Media Coverage Diplomatic and Mostly Positive

6.(C) On May 3, most Tunisian newspapers ran editorials supporting the idea of a free press. None dealt directly with the situation in Tunisia as all focused on general principles of a media sector "free from ideological and political exploitation" and "committed to people's concerns."

On May 4, all newspapers headlined the President's message to the journalists with three government-owned newspapers publishing editorials praising GOT efforts to promote freedom of the press in the country.

¶7. (SBU) In its May 11 issue, privately-owned Tunisian bilingual weekly magazine "Realites" published a series of articles that cited specific challenges faced by the press in Tunisia. The first was an editorial in French entitled "On press freedom, yet again" calling for new press laws that would improve the financial and professional aspects of Tunisian media to include transfer of ownership from one individual to a company, better management of public ads, and making it easier to establish a new media outlet. The second was an editorial in Arabic on the need for greater debate and discussion in the local media. The magazine also featured two long and detailed articles (one in French entitled "The Sad Destiny of Tunisian Journalists" and another in Arabic entitled "Addressing the Financial and Professional Needs of

Journalists") on the AJT report; both articles covered the report's presentation of the variety of problems faced by Tunisian journalists, informing readers of issues that are usually only discussed in media circles. The same issue of "Realites" also published a pointed interview with a retired GOT official, who was close to former President Bourguiba, in which the official described the important role of the press in Tunisian independence and criticized Bourguiba for not having permitted greater democracy and political openness in the country. (Comment. This is the first time in memory that a Tunisian news outlet has so widely and clearly addressed the situation of the media in the country. Through the use of pointed, but diplomatic language, "Realites" managed to expose the weakness of the media environment in Tunisia, without ever pointing its finger directly at the GOT. End Comment.)

Freedom of the Press in Tunisia -- Where does it Stand?

8.(C) Comment. Tunisia's observance of World Press Freedom Day and the resultant series of events -- Presidential proclamations in support of a free press, Tunisian media support of the President, blocked demonstrations, carefully balanced AJT reports, and government harassment of independent journalists such as Lotfi Hajji -- are a simple repetition of events from previous years. The only new development is the willingness by some journalists, such as those in "Realites," to carefully and quietly begin to discuss the reality of a tightly controlled and handicapped Tunisian media. These journalists, however, remain few in number and will likely continue to be limited in scope and power until GOT actions begin to match its rhetoric.

HUDSON